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Differing interpretations of injury stats

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ARCADIA, Calif. -- Statistics showing a reduction in fatal injuries in races since synthetic surfaces were installed at California racetracks was challenged as being a function of better oversight by race-day veterinarians, not necessarily safer surfaces, during a wide-ranging panel discussion Saturday morning at Santa Anita.

The discussion was organized by the Thoroughbred Owners of California, and had a diverse panel that included researchers, veterinarians, a racetrack executive, and two trainers. Approximately 200 people attended the event, which filled the Baldwin Terrace room on the second floor above Clocker's Corner.

During a follow-up discussion following the panel, trainer Darrell Vienna, who was in the audience, opined that statistics showing injuries decreased in the afternoon, but had remained static during training hours, was evidence that superior, pre-race work by California Horse Racing Board veterinarians might be more responsible for the trend down.

"That goes a long way toward reducing catastrophic injuries and explains why racing injuries are down while training injuries remain the same," Vienna said. "Let's not jump to the conclusion that synthetics are better for horses. There's a lot of variables to consider."

Vienna was following up on statistics provided by Rick Arthur, the California Horse Racing Board equine medical director, whose presentation showed a significant drop in catastrophic injuries since four of the state's tracks - Del Mar, Golden Gate Fields, Hollywood Park, and Santa Anita - were mandated nearly four years ago to install synthetic surfaces.

Arthur's slide show presentation said that 3.05 horses per 1,000 starts perished before synthetics were installed, and 1.93 per 1,000 since. He said statistics regarding fatalities from training accidents "do not show as dramatic a change," and said that, on occasion, the statistics at Golden Gate are "worse now."

Arthur said Santa Anita had had just two horses removed from its track during races since the meet began Dec. 26, "one a bleeder, and one a re-injury."

"There have been no fatalities the first seven weeks of the meet," said Arthur, who has spearheaded the improved pre-race veterinary exams that Vienna cited.

A major reason for fractures, according to a veterinarian from the University of California at Davis, could be pre-existing conditions that are not being picked up.

"We are convinced that a great majority of fatal breakdowns have pre-existing causes, which means they can be avoided," said Dr. F.A. Uzal, who does work on state-mandated post-mortems of horses who die at state-sanctioned facilities.

"These are very complex issues," Arthur said.

Craig Fravel, Del Mar's president, offered support for synthetic surfaces. He said the incidence of horses not finishing races is way down at his track compared to when it had a dirt surface. He also showed how Del Mar's average times, significantly slower than par in 2007 when Polytrack was first installed, have returned to norm the past two years because of an adjustment of maintenance.

During Fravel's slide-show presentation, he displayed and read several proverbs and notable quotes, including what he cited as an old Polish proverb, "The man who can't dance thinks the band is no good."

That upset trainer John Shirreffs, who followed Fravel's presentation. Shirreffs, despite training Zenyatta, is not a supporter of synthetic tracks.

"I know how to dance and that all bands are not equal, so I take a little offense to that," Shirreffs began. "The fact that we're having this meeting indicates we have a big problem."

Shirreffs said he has found that horses had to adjust their stride on synthetics, and that as horses get fitter "something undermines their well being."

"I call it a hidden-fatigue factor," he said. "As they get fitter, they're losing strength."

Shirreffs said the problem is especially acute with younger horses. And he said the synthetic surfaces have led to more issues with feet.

"It's so illogical," Shirreffs said. "They're supposed to be softer and kinder surfaces, but you have foot problems."

John Sadler, another trainer on the panel and the recently elected president of the California Thoroughbred Trainers Association, said that while fractures were down with synthetics, other injuries had replaced them.

"We have as many injuries," he said, citing "high suspensories, tibias, hind cannon bones, and pelvises."

"There are injuries we just didn't used to see," Sadler said.

Sadler said that in a recent poll of CTT membership, "70 percent of the trainers wanted Santa Anita to take out the track and put in a new and improved dirt track."

Jerry Moss, the owner of Zenyatta, said, "if Santa Anita was a dirt track, that would be a good start."